

A SYSTEM FOR DYNAMICALLY CHANGING THE COMMUNICATION MEANS USED FOR COMMUNICATION BETWEEN TWO SOFTWARE AGENTS

The present invention relates to a system enabling the communication means used between two software agents within a distributed architecture to be changed in dynamic manner. The invention applies particularly well to distributed agent architectures.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

The term "agent" or "software agent" is used to designate any piece of object code that is to some extent autonomous and independent. Because of this independence, communication between a plurality of agents can give rise to problems.

In present-day distributed software architectures, software agents communicate with one another over preestablished communication means. These channels can be of various kinds.

They can be point-to-point communication means or broadcast communication means or indeed other types of communication means can be used.

With point-to-point means, data sent by a first software agent is received only by a single second software agent via dedicated communication means.

With broadcast communication, the data sent by the first software agent can be received by one or more software agents.

The communication means can be an asynchronous communication channel such as a notification channel. By way of example, this type of communication means is very commonly used in the context of common object request broker architecture (CORBA) as defined by the open management group (OMG).

Another way of providing communication means is of the "blackboard" type: a software agent writes data for communication into a dedicated memory zone which is read periodically by the destination software agent(s).

Naturally, these examples of communication means do not constitute an exhaustive list of all methods of communication that can be used between two software agents.

5 Nevertheless, it is important to observe that in the state of the art, the particular communication means used are always determined when the software system is designed. In other words, no system is provided for enabling the communication means to be modified during
10 the lifetime of the system.

Unfortunatly, there exists a need to be able to modify the communication means between a plurality of software agents of a system in dynamic manner (i.e. during the lifetime of the system).

15 This need can stem from a preceding communication means being unavailable. Such unavailability can be the result, for example, of a connection breaking down in the computer network in which the sender and destination software agents are implemented.

20 The need can also arise from the necessity of maintaining the system. For example, in order to correct a problem in the system, it can be important to find out what information is being conveyed over a communication means. Under such circumstances, it is necessary to
25 modify the communication means so as to make it readable by an operator, or by some third software application.

Another need can arise from a desire to share loading. If some particular communication means is momentarily or permanently saturated with traffic, then
30 it can be beneficial to change it so as to increase the performance of the system.

OBJECTS AND SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

An object of the present invention is thus to satisfy these needs by proposing a system for dynamically
35 modifying the communication means used between two software agents for transmitting data.

To do this, the invention provides firstly for the system to comprise a communication server, and secondly for the software agents to include:

- a communication module giving access to said communication means; and

- means for receiving a new communication module from said communication server.

The invention also provides a method enabling the above-defined precautionary server and software agents to be used. The method comprises the following steps:

- said software agents sending messages to a communication server informing it of said breakdown;

- said server sending communication modules to said software agents, said communication modules being designed to give access to a different communication means; and

- said software agents using said communication modules to continue communicating.

Thus, in the present invention, it is not only possible to change dynamically the communication means used, but also it is possible to change it to the extent of changing its nature. Thus, communication which previously used a notification channel can dynamically opt for "blackboard" type communication.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWING

The invention and its advantages appear more clearly from the following description given with reference to the accompanying figures.

Figure 1 shows an implementation of the invention.

Figure 2 shows various steps in a scenario implementing the mechanisms of the invention.

MORE DETAILED DESCRIPTION

In Figure 1, two software agents C_1 and C_2 communicate via communication means M . By way of example, these software agents can be agents proper, i.e. independent software entities, having their own execution resource or "threads" available to them.

The communication means is a notification channel, for example. In order to use this communication channel, the software agents make use of communication modules M_1 and M_2 .

5 The software agents have no need to be aware of the nature of the communication means, nor do they need to be aware of how it is accessed, in other words which particular application programming interface (API) it presents.

10 According to a characteristic of the invention, all of the communication modules have the same programming interface I for presentation to software agents. Thus, software agents can access communication means in a single manner using this single programming interface
15 without being concerned about the programming interface of the communication means itself.

In other words, the role of the communication modules is to translate between the software agents via a first programming interface which is common, and the
20 communication means used via a second programming interface which is specific thereto.

This common first interface can, for example, include functions of the type "send message" and "receive message". The function of the communication module is to
25 implement those functions and to format the data for transmission as a function of the kind of communication means used.

The software agents C_1 and C_2 also have means G_1 and G_2 for receiving new communication modules from a
30 communication server S.

The communication server can be common for the entire system, or a plurality of communication servers can exist having means for exchanging information between one another.

35 The communication modules transmitted by the communication server(s) can replace the previous communication modules (M_1 and M_2). As mentioned above,

they preferably possess a programming interface that is identical to that of the preceding modules, but giving access, for example, to some other communication means (not shown).

5 As also mentioned above, this other communication means can be of the same kind as the preceding communication means, i.e. in this case a notification channel. Under such circumstances, the reason why it might be necessary change notification means could be
10 saturation of the first notification channel, or that it has been interrupted due to an accident to the system, or indeed because it is desired to use a channel that provides a different quality of service.

15 It is also possible for the communication means to be of a different kind, e.g. of the "blackboard" type.

 To make transmission possible, the communication modules (which are software elements) are preferably encoded in a language such as Java that enables their object code to be caused to migrate through a distributed
20 computer system. Under such circumstances, it is possible for the software agents to load communication modules dynamically by using this particular mechanism of the Java language.

 It is also possible to provide for the object code
25 corresponding to the various communication modules that can potentially be used to be stored locally. The communication server then only transmits references designating a particular communication module from the set of available modules.

30 Figures 2a, 2b, 2c, and 2d show the case in which the notification means is changed at the initiative of the software agent following a breakdown of this first communication means.

 In Figure 2a, the software agents C_1 and C_2 are
35 communicating over a notification channel M.

For some reason, the notification channel is interrupted and is no longer capable of transmitting information between these two software agents.

In Figure 2b, the software agents have become aware
 5 of the breakdown in the notification channel (e.g. by failure to receive an acknowledgment from said notification channel after sending data). On becoming aware of the interruption, the software agents send messages alr to the communication server S informing it
 10 of the breakdown of the communication means between the two software agents C_1 and C_2 .

In response to these two messages, the communication server S sends two communication modules M_1 and M_2 to the two software agents C_1 and C_2 .

15 These two communication modules are designed to use a blackboard (BB) type communication means. They are then integrated in the software agent, e.g. by being loaded dynamically as mentioned above.

In Figure 2d, the two software agents can again
 20 communicate, at this time via a new communication means (of the "blackboard" type) by using the two communication modules M_1 and M_2 that they received from the communication server S .

In an implementation of the invention, the
 25 communication server can on its own initiative send communication modules to the software agents, thereby changing the communication means they use for communicating.

By way of example, the communication server may
 30 cause such a change to take place in application of a predetermined relationship. For example, it can change the communication means once every five messages on the empirical assumption that that will minimize overloading of the various communication means in the system.

35 Changeover can also be caused by the communication server in response to a warning due to some particular communication means becoming overloaded.

In the first case it is a question of taking preventative action so as to avoid an overload occurring, whereas in the second case the idea is to minimize the consequences of such overloading.